

Sociological Dimensions of Representation: Othering & Stereotyping

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Abstract

This paper investigates into multiple forms and dimensions of representation employed in literary works and public affairs. It is a thorough study of secondary works published on the issues ranging from representation to stereotyping—general to specific sociological practices in writing. The article aims to examine the societal predicaments as depicted in writings and verbal expressions. More than this, the paper uncloaks the dominating temperament of majority community in culturally diverse societal setting. How the minority groups are treated by the socially and culturally privileged community is the corpus of the investigation. The article discusses the concept of representation by Stuart Hall and the concept of othering by Lajos Brons in order for examining the other forms of representation. The meaning is constructed by the dominant community for underprivileged groups such as people of color in the United States of America, South Asians in the international space, and women in the global phenomena. The generalized views about any sociological category become the stereotypes which stigmatize the community in entirety. The individual drawbacks must not be associated with the distinctive features of a large sociological group as the process becomes unfair and biased.

Key Words: Representation, othering, stereotyping, western, eastern, European, Asian

Introduction

The paper primarily discusses diverse concepts including representation, othering, stereotyping in the light of the theorists such as Stuart Hall, Stephen Spencer and so on. Stuart Hall defines representation as "a process of secondary significance which enters into the field only after things have been fully formed and their meaning shaped" (5). In Hall's idea, representation is the projection of original contents. In a way, Hall considers representation as a replica that holds secondary importance, in which society constructs the meaning by representing the world as its understanding. For him, meaning is thought, produced, and constructed. No meaning is already there. However, representation can be investigated. He further says that culture is primary and its representation into different forms is a social construct. In his view, representation is a means of transmitting culture. "Culture is conceptualized as a primary process equally significant to the materialistic world in constituting social subjects and historical events" (Hall 5-6). For him, the capitalistic world constitutes social subjects and historical events. Relating the significance of representation to the material forms, he asserts:

Representation can only be properly analyzed in relation to the actual concrete forms which meaning assumes, in the concrete practices of signifying, 'reading'

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and interpretation: and these require analysis of the actual signs, symbols, figures, images, narratives, words and sounds—the material forms—in which symbolic meaning is circulated. (9)

The concrete forms of signifying, analyzing, interpreting needs the analysis of signs, symbols, figures, images, words, and sounds—the means of representing the occurrences, which can only help grasp meanings. For him, meanings are context-based, and therefore, meaning is implied. The context helps us to understand symbolic significance of the represented objects, as there is the interconnectedness between events and circumstances. Discourses about events are constructed through language and finally language constructs. Thus, discourses become medium of constituting knowledge about events and occurrences (6). Hall's argument suggests that the power holders make discourses using language and media help construct knowledge and represent a particular section of society in order to construct the intended knowledge.

Othering is a common practice in diversity. The privileged underrate the unprivileged groups and project with different generalized signs and symbols which devalue and sometimes dehumanize the individuals in societal affairs. Consequently, the gaps between groups especially majority community and minority communities deliberately begin to maintain distance from each other in almost all affairs of life. Such things usually turn into confrontations and warfare as well. Therefore, misrepresentation of any groups needs deterring and if possible must be stopped for the formation of a healthy society that can accommodate and foster differences.

Discussion

Stephen Spencer clarifies the concepts of representation and othering in *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity and Representation*. He argues that the other as a being embodies characteristics different from ours based on "gender, race, class, custom or behavior". Our background influences our behaviors on understanding of differences. This Other "represents an area of consensus" (8) and the shared values of the mainstream culture or minority cultures. Spencer's perspective on Other can help to interpret conflicts caused by cultural differences in a diverse society. Spencer elucidates the concept of othering by projecting the other as opposite of the self. For Hall, the three broad approaches—the reflective, the intentional, and the constructionist, can help elucidate the way representation of meaning through language functions. In the reflective approach, meaning is considered to lie in the object, person, idea, or event in the real world, and language works like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning, as it already exists in the world; in the intentional approach, the speaker imposes her /his distinct meaning on the world through language. Hall grants an agency to the author as authors construct signification. In the constructionist approach, objects do not have any meanings. The authors create meaning using representational systems—concepts and signs (24-5). In Hall's view, things do not carry values. Rather, their values are constructed. Besides, the author holds the power and control on the signification of the objects.

In the reflective approach, meaning apparently lies and language mirrors the signification inherent in the material world. The intentional approach demonstrates that the author imposes her separate "meaning on the world through language" (25). I prefer the constructionist approach to representation since it helps to recognize social characters constructed out of signs and images. For Hall, this approach unravels that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can ascertain meaning in language. The author constructs significance, using representative systems-concepts, and signs (25). Hall's constructionist approach reveals that representation is an essential part in the process of producing and exchanging meaning between people in a culture that involves language, signs, and images symbolic of things (15). Besides, meaning is produced in a language through different representational systems. The act of representation produces meaning constructed through signifying practices (Hall 28). Hall avers that national cultures, their representation systems and symbols are the means of constructing meanings, which lead people to think and act in a particular way. He highlights the constructed meanings that affect the conception of identity and the idea of a nation within which people can identify themselves (qtd. in Muukkonen 23). Representation systems and other signifying elements prepare the readers for thinking differently. The majority White society affects the psyche of the Black in the Western world and consequently the latter internalize the attitudes of the former, because of contact with the White civilization. Black people moved to the Western world from non-Western civilizations (Hall 14). The White people through the misuse of power have influenced even the thoughts of Black people. Hall connects the power relation with the social dynamics, and states that the more dominant groups exercise the symbolic power of representation by stereotyping in a cultural and symbolic context (193). In fact, the dominant groups use the language to ascribe meaning to the Other.

Hall's observation on the dichotomy between the White and the Black enables the readers to question difference and otherness created by the power holders. The discourse structured around the binary oppositions via the White and the Black is racialized and adds that this discourse positions the black as signifiers of difference and the white as humans through stereotypes. The white develop stereotypes for the black people to essentialize the latter. Thus, the white establishes the demarcation of the "we" and "the Other". Eventually, this frontier between these two races shows the inequalities of power. This is how Hall shows the interconnectedness of representation, difference, stereotyping, and power (243-258).

For Hall, representation is done to comprehend the world around by interacting with human understanding. In his view, human beings translate systems of values, ideas, and practices into a social reality for themselves and for others. The idea may be re-articulated in some way. He projects re-articulation as representation. Hall further avers that this representation is always a relational, collaborative, and deeply political process (qtd. in Philogène 12). This process of communication causes change and stability, resistance and containment in the genesis of knowledge, as seen in both primary communicative genres and secondary communicative ones. Hall also explores the deeply ideological and

restrictive nature of representations and their very agentic and transgressive nature (qtd. in 74). In communication, not all of a representation is open to elaboration, development, or contradiction. He points out diverse constituents: the core and periphery. Historical, sociological, and ideological conditions determine the core of a representation, which is stable, coherent, consensual, and historically marked (Hall 74-76). The periphery is more responsive to the communicative exchanges within which it occurs. Hall further asserts that peripheral elements are open to challenge and reconsideration, and are "flexible, adaptive, and relatively heterogeneous" (77). Hegemonic representations are relatively unchanging over time and the central point of ideas almost completely dominates these depictions.

Caroline Howarth defines social representation as "a system of common values, ideas and practices that enable people to understand each other and communicate about similar issues" (2). For Howarth, social representation includes a degree of personal understanding leading to differences in interpretation, and diverse interactions with the texts. She further states that these "representations may be hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional" (2). Howarth shows many possibilities of social representations. Shehla Burney in "Re-doing the Narratives of Empire": Representation and Re-presentation" defines representation as a "means by which society re-presents itself" (61). For Burney, representation helps us to define our position in life; it mediates our identity; it discloses the ways in which we look at others and us. He further argues that representation recognizes our subjectivity in art, literature, academic curricula, media, and politics. In this context, such representations influence the way we make meaning and recognize ourselves as human subjects (61).

Burney reemphasizes the crucial roles of representations in cultural theory through a frontier between the orient and the occident. Burney relates the cultural binarism with that of Edward Said's Orientalism, which as a practice discloses the way the Western media represent women. Burney further avers that the media depict women as helpless and mindless commodities of desire and attraction. These media portray the minorities as exotic or strangers and stereotype them as murdering villains opposite to normal human beings. In his view, orientalism manipulates the reality and depicts the Arab, the Middle East, and Islam as the Other. He points out that orientalism is still alive in the West's hegemonic representation of the Arab Muslims (63-64). Said is critical of the hegemonic representation of the Muslims and Islam by the Orientalists in his uniquely popular book, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. He writes, "the iconography of Islam was uniform, was uniformly ubiquitous, and drew its material from the same time-honored view of Islam: hence the frequent caricatures of Muslims as oil suppliers, as terrorists, and more recently, as bloodthirsty mobs" (6). The Eurocentric representation of Muslims and Islam is questionable. This line of argument relates to the generalized understanding of Muslims that leads to resistance. Meanwhile, the West misrepresents Islam, because Westerners think that "the West is modern, greater than the sum of its parts, full of enriching contradictions and yet always "Western" in its cultural identity; the world of Islam, on the other hand, is more than

"Islam" reducible to a small number of unchanging characteristics" (Said 10-11). The Western notion of understanding the Muslim World is a stable cultural entity.

The precept of the Westerners about the Muslim-dominated countries is objectionable, as it seems to ignore the possibility of change in Muslim culture. Islam stayed for several Europeans as a kind of religio-cultural challenge that encouraged European imperialism to erect its institutions on Islamic land (Said 13). For the public in the US and Europe, "Islam is "news" of a particularly unpleasant sort. The media, the government, the geopolitical strategists, and—although they are marginal to the culture at large—the academic experts on Islam are all in concert: Islam is a threat to Western civilization" (144). In my view, these negative images of Islam culturally divide the American society. Besides, the intercultural relationship of Muslims with European Americans mires because of cultural bigotry. The practice of othering Muslims in the United States of American weakens the intercultural ties in culturally diverse society.

The concept of othering as defined by Lajos Brons relates to the characters othered in the novels. For Brons, othering can create distance between self and other by "means of a dehumanizing over-inflation of otherness" (72). Indeed this other is not inferior, though "radically alien" (72). In either case, the effect is a near impassable margin between the self and the inferior that justifies "social exclusion, discrimination, and/or subjection" (72). The concept of othering reflects in the act of representation of other units as foreign through hierarchy in which the self is privileged, whereas the other is devalued in one way or other. Nevertheless, this process is not exhibited in order to assume this hierarchy extant in the "nature of the phenomena, rather than a motivated construction" (74). In the same vein, Shehla Burney argues that when the privileged use the knowledge of the Other to generate forcible stereotypes, they become selective and exclusionary so that their act of othering can negate "individual differences, internal diversity, and heterogeneity" (102). Burney adds that these differences based on economy, sexual orientation, faiths, academic qualifications, race, language, geography, and ethnicity are not acknowledged (102). This othering as a technique of representing minority Muslims and Islam pervades in the main plots of the 9/11 novels. The novelists interrogate the practice of othering Muslim characters. The practice of representing cultural differences has the linkage with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which he argues that representations can never be starkly objective. Not even the written language holds the delivered presence of the subject. It is just a representation. Therefore, the written document about the orient deserves little reliability (102).

When reflecting on the interpretive circle, "Knowledge of the social is, in short, *always* no better than the interpretations on which it is based. All our knowledge of so complex and elusive a phenomenon as Islam comes about through texts, images, experiences that are not direct embodiments of Islam . . . but representations or interpretations of it" (Said 168). For him, knowledge about other cultures, religions, societies, or peoples comes through mediation. The mediated knowledge is tainted with personal situation of the scholar who transmits information about. Said points out "time, place, personal gifts, historical situation, as well as the overall political circumstances" (168) affect the

produced knowledge. In his view, the scholar produces knowledge to suit the interest of a particular situation.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said traces that culture is represented as there is the depiction of the Orient, Islam, and the Arab, in particular. "Culture means two things in particular. First of all it means all those practices. Like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure" (Introduction xii). The representability of culture is the aesthetic property, which the author can use as a tool to transmit through writings. However, the representation of Islam and Muslims goes beyond the aesthetic limit. "The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future" (Introduction xii-xiii), are reflected, and decided in the fictional form. Hence, culture intersects the economic and political zone. The depiction of culture transcends the customary functionality of narrative. Said refers to Matthew Arnold and his time when the representation of culture was limited to the binarism: "us" and "them". Then, culture is "a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent "returns" to culture and tradition" (Introduction xiii). He shows a lacuna in the scope of culture in the sense that it was limited to identity formation, but now it has a political and economic significance.

Binarism prevails in both Western imperialism and Third World nationalism, which feed off each other. However, "even at their worst they are neither monolithic nor deterministic" (Said Introduction xxiv). This culture is neither monolithic nor the exclusive property of East or West. Rather it is dynamic and is therefore, subject to change and share. Implicitly, culture is devoid of purity. It is sharable and common property that anyone can adopt and own it. Because of empire, all cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous devoid of purity (Said Introduction xxv). The scope of culture demonstrates that the representation of a culture exclusively in narratives could be an authorial flaw. Since culture is not uniformly single, it cannot be generalized. If done, it becomes susceptible to interrogation.

Although no culture is monolithic, and deterministic, the US, the holder of greatest power because of its trans-national corporations that control the manufacture, distribution, and all section of news, subordinates and compels domestic American constituencies as well as weaker and smaller cultures (Said 292). This hegemonic role of the US becomes the cause of cultural resistance by minority cultures in the aftermath of 9/11. In Said's observation, media represent strange and foreign cultures crossing the geographic limits. To cater the home audience with the vested news, the US media go beyond the nation to manipulate the phenomena of "Others" (292). The Western media portray Arabs as those who "only understand force; brutality and violence" (295) as the part of Arab civilization. "Islam is an intolerant, segregationist, "medieval", fanatic, cruel, anti-woman religion" (295). The depiction of Islam and Arab world by the Western media regardless of contexts unfolds the pages of the cultural hegemony of the West. Showing the relationship between the

East and the West, Said in *Orientalism* asserts that orientalism spreads "geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (12). The political and cultural power relationship becomes clear in Said's definition of orientalism as a discourse. He relates orientalism with the power politics that orientalism:

produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or *imperial* establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any orthodoxies and canons of taste, *texts, values*), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do). (12)

It illustrates that the political, cultural, and intellectual relationship between the East and the West is unbalanced. The latter exercises its power in the world of the Orient through sciences and imperialism. By imposing their values, and ideas upon the Orient assuming that the Westerners are better in terms of politics, intellects, and moral values. Consequently, the demarcation between 'we' and 'they' becomes clearer. The cultural domination of the Westerners inherent in the American society revives in the post-9/11, but this time the Other is Islam rather than the East. While tracing the origin of orientalism, he elaborates:

Orientalism derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only India and the Bible lands. From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain once did. (Said 4)

Orientalism, which France and Britain undertook as a means of controlling the East intellectually, culturally and politically till the World War Second, becomes much useful for the United States to dominate the Orient. However, this time American domination can be seen in the Middle East rather than in India.

Othering is a technique employed to represent people or communities. Scholars' viewpoints on othering are manifold. However, their core viewpoint is similar. Johanna Muukkonen defines othering as a means of including and excluding the concepts of identity and the foundations of national identities (19). Muukkonen argues that this othering has a long history of its practice. John Powell and Stephen Menendian in their article, "The Problem of Othering" assert that othering does not only encompass diverse expressions of prejudice based on shared identities but also the term provides a revealing set of common processes and conditions which flourish collective inequality and marginality. They further argue that the othering as a set of dynamics, processes, and structures engenders marginality and continual inequality across all ranges of human differences based on group identities. Powell and Menendian expose different dimensions of othering such as religion, sex, race, ethnicity, social class, disability, sexual orientation,

and skin tone (17). In their view, othering is a wide-ranging theoretical framework that "captures expressions of prejudice and behaviors such as atavism and tribalism"(18). These scholars also put forward the practical solution to the problem of othering. They believe the solution to othering is possible through the implementation of inclusion and belongingness. Their analysis unravels that as soon as the excluded groups are included in the dominant social and political affairs, the other feels belonging.

Powell and Menendian exemplify that the excluded receive the societal membership and consequently, they reach the position of decision-making. Thus, mainstream society can then start tolerating and respecting the excluded. In their observation, in such tolerant and welcoming milieu, the Others feel that they belong to the society—"the circle of human concern involves "humanizing the other", where negative representations and stereotypes are challenged and rejected" (32). Pluralism and multiculturalism are solutions to the problem of othering, for both of the circumstances prop up the construction of new inclusive stories, identities, and frames along with the space for acceptance of difference (33-4). In their view, multiculturalism is as a means to solving the problem of othering because multiculturalism as an inclusive concept respects all cultures equal and unique. In fact, pluralism as a solution to othering does not seem convincing. Pluralism does not necessarily respect all cultural groups equal. Rather, it refers to a state of having cultural groups.

Connecting otherness with identity, Jean-Francois Staszak takes otherness as the result of a discourse process by which a dominant in-group identified with "us" the self, and constructs one or many dominated out-groups as "them", or the other. The former discriminately stigmatizes the latter with a difference as a denial of identity. Difference belongs to the territory of fact and otherness belongs to the sphere of communication. "Biological sex is difference, whereas gender is otherness" (2). The construction of otherness comprises of implementing a theory, which permits people to part into hierarchy between them and us. Staszak links the binary relation between them and us with out-group/in-group. Out-group is only consistent as a group because of its difference and lack of identity. The crisis of identity relies on stereotypes. The concept of 'the self' constructs one or more others giving itself a separate identity. Otherness and identity are entwined in such a way that the Other's existence relates to that of the self, and vice versa. However, the unbalanced power relationships rampant between the Self and the Other is pivotal to the construction of otherness. In my view, it is almost impossible for the out-groups to formulate their own values in the dominated society, wherein the dominated do not have any privileges to work independently for constructing their identity.

Reflecting on the origin of otherness, Sisay Mengstie asserts that otherness is predominantly an outcome of social, political, cultural, and other kinds of constructions. Education is one of several agents of otherness as revealed in history that education constructs "otherness" communities based on language, culture, religion, gender, ethnicity, geography and so on. The formation of otherness benefits dominant groups in society (7). Other major agents such as social interactions, media, literature, art, folklore, and so on construct otherness. However, education—an agency of creating otherness— determines

individual and collective identity (8). Mengstie's argument infers that education imparts the knowledge about the individual identity and the roles she or he should perform as a member of a particular community.

While tracing the origin of othering, S. Q. Jensen avers that othering can be figured out by looking at its theories that evolved in the postcolonial period of the 1970s and 1980s. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was the first scholar to mention and elaborate othering as a concept. She redrew the way colonial masters in India employed formulations of difference to subject the 'Other'. Spivak defines 'Othering' as the symbolic humiliation as well as the process of forming identity targeted to degrading (qtd. in Jensen 65). Based on Said's views on Orientalism, Spivak writes that the West creates identities of the orient fully in opposite to itself. B. Anderson says in "Imagined Communities" that Said takes difference as a social construct rather than a fact in cultural communities. For Spivak, this logic of distinction is politics of 'binarism' inherent in the postcolonial illustration of the 'self-other relationship'. The individual subjectivity is defined through a special moment. 'Othering' is a demonstration of characteristics that are "not defining for the (homogenous) in-group, to the collective of a non-western out-group" (qtd. in Barnett 147). Othering does not define homogeneity. Rather it characterizes individuality. N. Fairclough connects this logic to Foucault's statement that relations with others in turn always require relations with oneself, and vice versa (28).

For Ruth Wodak and Boukala, the formation of national identity motivates othering to a certain extent as well. They point out membership in the form of citizenship has a special character, since it labels who belongs to the in-group and who belongs to the out-group (253). However, they show the possibility of negotiation in changed societal circumstances. D. Bar-Tal relates the concept of othering with stereotypes of the out-groups in his article, "Delegitimization: The Extreme Case of Stereotyping and Prejudice". The history of the study of stereotypes emerged in the 1950s. Stereotypes are as "a set of beliefs about the characteristics of a social category of people" (342) such as personality traits, attributions, intentions, and behavioral descriptions. Stereotyping that people express, the behaviors and discourses smeared into stereotypes in interactions as they have internalized the stereotypes (493). Stereotypes: auto-stereotypes that regard people's in-group and hetero-stereotypes related to an out-group. Stereotypes are often static, limited, and lifeless. However, such stereotypes do not go consistent when not everybody shares their content. When focusing on the purpose of stereotyping, R. Scollon and S. Wong Scollon assert that stereotyping is contextually and individually determined. Stereotypes can serve the purpose of showing how superior one's group is. In their view, stereotypes have an ideological aspect (169). Scollon and Wong Scollon's argument on the ideological aspect of stereotypes is vague. While linking othering with the social portrayal, Abdullah-Preteille states that othering is a form of social representation. This othering consists in "objectification of another person or group" or "creating the Other," that ignores the complexity and subjectivity of the individual. Besides, othering allows individuals to construct sameness and difference and to assert their identity (87). Othering is not only about the other but also about the self. This concept of othering sounds convincing.

Conclusion

The article has examined representation theory as the primary tool of portraying the underprivileged peoples in a culturally diverse society. There is a close relationship between culture and representation. The theoretical discussion on representation and its forms including othering and stereotyping demonstrates the pivotal role of Stuart Hall in conceptualizing representation as a theory to examine the social and cultural phenomena. Hall is the core figure of representation theory. The paper has undertaken othering, and stereotyping as the main versions of representation generally used in depicting cultures especially minority cultures and their socio-economic status in the broader spectrum of diverse society. Besides Hall, there have been many theorists including S. Q. Riesmann et al who define representation as uncertain and open for discussion and interpretation. The article has examined the diverse reasons for representation. The finding is that the depiction of marginalized and underprivileged communities is generally biased in a pluralistic society wherein diversity is a burden for the majority community.

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